

Chapter Five

Journeys into Facts of Blackness in Zoë Wicomb's Short Stories¹

The deployments of textures of everyday life in constructions of identity, phrased as self-reclamation throughout this thesis, are often presented as experiences of entanglement in the dominant orders that are being negotiated, and as sites of memory.² This entrapment is succinctly captured in the drawing in which Joël Matlou focuses on a pair of spectacle lenses which mirrors what appears to be his father pushing a wheelbarrow. As already discussed, the glasses function as a metaphor through which Matlou junior develops insight into how black people cultivate moral/spiritual strength in being aware of the extent of the inanity that underpins the racial abuse such as implied in the cold aloofness of his father's employer, that is, the one who in Matlou's drawing is wearing glasses. What the mirror reflects back to Matlou junior is a history of toil that his father overshadows via his awareness of his master's inability or unwillingness to identify with other people.³ The eyeglasses in Matlou's diagram and the colonial stereotype of a black woman in Wicomb's stories are the media that, reminiscent of Ndebele's the "ordinary" that gives rise to ironic distancing, the protagonists use as targets or norms beyond which the self is projected.

¹ Zoë Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town and Other Stories*, (London: A Virago Book, 1987).

² On the subject of memory, see, for example, Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley, LA, London: University of California Press, 2001). Another useful text is Richard Werbner, ed., *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the critique of power*, (London & New York: Zed Books, 1998).

³ See Chapter One.

In Njabulo Ndebele, Mandla Langa, and Bheki Maseko's stories, comparable enterprises of memory are evident in, for instance, the invocations (as if through incantation) of the tropes of power that are considered to be appropriate to deal with the marginality to which one is reduced. The body, especially in Ndebele and Langa's stories,⁴ is brought to consciousness and acknowledged as a site that is inscribed with colonial negation, and then initiated or inaugurated via symbolic practices (such as music, dance, running) into an alternative framework of authority. Both Ndebele and Langa present these intervention strategies as ritual in orientation. It is in Langa's stories that these tropes of power are subjected to a detailed and sustained interrogation.

As suggested in the use of the female narrator's focus on a black woman's body as it appears in racist and sexist colonial discourse, Wicomb's stories introduce a project of memory. This feminist angle is investigated for self-reflexivity in this chapter. But first, the key features of memory-making in Wicomb's stories are outlined. The lengthier section of the chapter presents readings of several of Wicomb's stories that examine colonial alienation as well as the images of power that the narrator foregrounds for the sort of self-reclamation that transcends the revisionist responses to colonialism.

The black woman's body in 'You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town', 'When the Train Comes', 'Behind the Bougainvillea' and by implication in 'A Trip to the Gifberge' is a

⁴ See Chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis, respectively.

recurring motif through which Frieda Shenton, the “single narrator-focalizer”,⁵ investigates depersonalisation. Critical attention to this particular theme of trauma in Wicomb’s stories traces it to the dilemma of being denied acknowledgment in terms of the apartheid myth that defines identity as white racial purity. This scholarship alleges the existence of the sense of (un)belonging defined as “coloured”,⁶ and further submits that it is not ‘resolved’ in Wicomb’s fiction by affirming blackness, because her “writing signifies not order but disorder, not authority but dissidence, not stereotype but difference”.⁷ Blackness, Desire Lewis maintains, is a mere essence that “establish[es] subject positions and conclusively fix[es] personal and collective being”,⁸ and, thus, “crowd[s] the subject, shaping responses and being in relation to others in ways which cannot be transcended”.⁹ From a different angle, Flockemann refers to the “literal and figurative journeys which provide scope for exploring the strategies of belonging or... a dream of belonging” in Wicomb’s stories. Flockemann maintains that these travels establish a “diasporic subject[hood]... where the negative meanings of unbelonging are

⁵ Sue Marais, “Getting Lost in Cape Town: Spatial and Temporal Dislocation in the South African Short Fiction Cycle,” *English in Africa*, (Vol.22, No.2, October, 1995), p.42.

⁶ For an analysis of the concept “coloured,” see, for instance, Desire Lewis, “Writing Hybrid Selves: Richard Rive and Zoë Wicomb,” *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town*, Zimitri Erasmus ed., (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African Online, 2001), pp.131-159, and Miki Flockemann, “Fictions of Home and (Un)belonging: Diasporan Frameworks in Michele Cliff’s ‘Abeng’ and Zoë Wicomb’s ‘Journey to the Gifberge,’” *Alternation*, (Vol.8, No.1, 2001), pp.116-133.

⁷ Dorothy Driver, “Transformation Through Art: Writing, Representation, and Subjectivity in Recent South African Fiction,” *World Literature Today*, (Vol. 70, No.1, Winter 1996), p.46.

⁸ Desire Lewis, op.cit., p.131.

⁹ Op. cit., p.147.

reconstructed.”¹⁰ However, there has been little attempt thus far to analyse the nature of the mediation of the negation that the narrator, Frieda, regularly notes as manifesting itself on her body. Nor has there been much discussion of the narrator’s focus on her body, especially her imagining of her transgression of the Immorality Act as well as of her decision to terminate her pregnancy, as reclamation of the black female body maligned by colonial history and as a fantastic performance of the identity that is anti-colonialist and anti-nationalitarian.¹¹

This chapter, therefore, considers the recurrence of the narrator’s “[c]onsciousness” of her body as black and female during apartheid, and hence as “solely a negating activity”¹² that is reminiscent of the sense of helplessness that permeates the colonised in projects of self-reclamations. The argument is that she deals with this awareness of estrangement by telling her *‘Bildungsroman’* in terms of repetitive narrative cycles of entanglement and escape. These portray an open-ended normativity of herself. It will be submitted that this attentiveness can be detected in a characteristic plot structure in which she agonises over the proscriptions that she feels are made for her strictly on the basis of being a woman (‘When the Train Comes’, ‘You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town’, ‘Behind the Bougainvillea’) and as a subject that attempts to affirm a notion of ownership of the material and cultural spaces violated and appropriated by apartheid policies. As discussed

¹⁰ Miki Flockemann, “Fictions of Home and (Un)belonging: Diasporan Frameworks in Michele Cliff’s ‘Abeng’ and Zoë Wicomb’s ‘Journey to the Gifberge’, *Alternation*, (Vol.8, No.1, 2001), p.119.

¹¹ See Kwame A. Appiah’s “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry*, (Vol.17, Winter 1991), pp.336-357.

¹² Franz Fanon. See Chapter, “The Fact of Blackness”, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans., Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.109-140.

below, one way out of this entrapment is by making articulations that recast her body and other ethnoscares in a way that deconstructs the (mostly racial) antinomies that police the terms of the imprisonment that she portrays for herself. Through these enunciations, she develops a series of dynamic and context-specific sense of her identity that are also made obvious in the rituals that take place in her community. An example of a rite that she identifies as taking place in her community and according to which she performs her own vision of a liberated black subject concerns black women's use of creams to develop a lighter complexion. Another instance is the usage of the notion "coloured" and the concept "Hottentot"/"hotnot" as well as other derogatory equivalents to chastise mediocrity, or ironically during attempts to motivate colleagues who, in various contexts, would be looked down upon in terms of colonial discourse ('Bowl Like Hole' 9, 'When the Train Comes' 24, 30, 'Home Sweet Home' 86, 'Behind the Bougainvillea' 105, 116, 'A Trip to the Gifberge' 164). This seeming interest in the European paternal lineage ironically affirms a framework of humanity that includes bigots without being trapped in their exclusionary identity politics. Also, ostensibly, one is not lulled into a false sense of oneness with extremists. Instead, there is a rejection of identity when constructed or mobilised for parochial ends. The kind of feminism that develops '*carnavalesque*' or a profaning of revered authority is, thus, argued below as secular and eclectic.

In an interesting study titled "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination",¹³ bell hooks attempts to chart how black people can transcend whiteness as a sign of horror,

¹³ hooks, bell, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler eds., (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), pp.338-346.

indeed that which treats blackness as invisible except when racially exploiting it as cheap labour. Her essay clarifies one possible justification for the portraits of black racial liminality such as recur in Wicomb's stories. While acknowledging that some black people in racist contexts show a fascination with whiteness equating it with civilisation, hooks insists that this obsession coexists with the knowledge of whiteness as racist terrorism to be seen with disdain and derision.

According to hooks, one way of dealing with the menace that whiteness poses is to journey through memory to the incidents of racial abuse. "[R]itual enactment" is a phrase that she uses to refer to this enterprise that, she argues is a "confrontation that forces the terror to loosen its grip" or "that conquers terror"¹⁴ through the "fantasy of escape, or the promise that what [was] lost will be found, rediscovered, returned."¹⁵ Reenactment of "terror," albeit (sometimes) perverse in mode, constitutes a narrative/story that a black person authors and, along with it, an imagined sense of victory. The idea is not to rearticulate the incidents of callousness in that strategy known as "mimicry".¹⁶ On the contrary, the performer establishes difference by journeying into these sites of distress, and so establishes difference by bringing to awareness a traumatic experience that the

¹⁴ hooks, bell, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler eds., (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), p.342.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p.343.

¹⁶ Homi Bhabha maintains that the colonised's re-articulation of the values enshrined in the civilising mission is an act of "mimicry" that debunks the claim to civilisation. See Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *Modern Literary Theory*, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, eds., (London: Arnold, 1989), p.234-241. Compare also with Stephanie Newell. According to her, "mimicry," at least in Ghanaian fiction, does not enunciate parody. See her "Redefining Mimicry: Techniques And the Role of Readers in Locally Published Ghanaian Fiction," *Research in African Literatures*, (Vol.31, No.1, Spring, 2000), pp.32-49.

dominant order has established as its sphere of supremacy. This is possible, because “texts” in which ideologies are written do not “possess... one valid and unitary meaning,” and hence are treated as being polysemic.¹⁷ hooks further elaborates:

This contradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates, is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror.¹⁸

Seen via bell hooks’s explication above, self-reclamation is impossible without involving in an ‘unspectacular’ way’ what Njabulo Ndebele calls the “spectacular” that he appears to maintain is the anti-thesis of the “ordinary”. As argued below, the perspectives from which Frieda narrates her biography create platforms that are strategic. For instance, her undermining of the colonial racism that informs how she (as a black woman) has been constructed is made possible through a project in which the “ordinary” seems impossible without first documenting identity through the “spectacular”. This is why Frieda finds it imperative to ‘travels’ into sites that portray black women through stereotype and to narrate how for instance, black people tell stories and perform acts that mediate racial depersonalisation via insurgent practices. Several images of these acts of mutiny are examined. Frieda’s portrayal of herself as a young girl who observes her parents dealing with colonial alienation through ‘*carnavalesque*’ (‘Bowl Like Howl’), as a teenager who discovers for the first time the brutality of racial segregation (‘When The Train Comes’),

¹⁷ Antonio Gramsci in Dominic Strinati, *Introduction to Popular Culture*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p.213.

¹⁸ bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds., (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), p.338.

as a young adult who realises that being pregnant with a white man's child constitutes an offence¹⁹ ('You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town') and as an adult who discovers that the liberation struggle is gendered ('Behind the Bougainvillea'). The discussion that follows also submits that, in all these stories, Frieda "confront[s] and... appropriate[s]" the images constructed of black women's bodies via "metacommentary", because she sees them "as... always already read"²⁰ and "overdetermined from without".²¹

If there is one objective that informs the narration of the title story, 'You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town', then it is that it attempts to authenticate a black female discourse without elevating it to "an allegorical or mythical affirmation of sexual difference as the best paradigm for understanding differences... between men and women".²² In the nature of what bell hooks terms "ritual enactment", the black female body in this story is cleansed of the vile proscription of the Immorality Act, of the designation coloured, and of the racist and gendered denunciation of having had an abortion. Indeed, these constitute the otherness that slips out of the lexicon of apartheid as the fact of black womanhood.²³ The

¹⁹ According to John Dugard, "[t]he Immorality Act of 1957 [of South Africa] makes it an offence for a white person to have intercourse with a black person or to commit any "immoral or indecent act" with such a person." *Human Rights and the South African Legal Order*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.69.

²⁰ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (London: Methuen, 1983), p.9.

²¹ See Franz Fanon's description of the colonised black man "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans., Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp.109-140.

²² Johanna Forster, "An Invitation to Dialogue: Clarifying the Position of Feminist Gender Theory in Relation to Sexual Difference Theory," in *Gender & Society*, (Vol.13, No.4, August 1999), p.436.

²³ This phrase is coined in order to dialogue with Franz Fanon's "fact of blackness." Anne McClintock's critique that Fanon's construct of the colonial is gendered is here supported. See McClintock, "Fanon and Gender Agency," *Rethinking*

journey undertaken by Frieda to the abortionist, first to meet her boyfriend Michael, the white man whose child she is carrying, and ultimately to terminate her pregnancy, is a reenactment of the terror that many colonised black women are likely to dread.

Constructing a black female subjectivity thus begins by foregrounding the “embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject”.²⁴

Thus, before undergoing the procedure, she takes stock of her body through a third person point of view, specifically through her consciousness of her womb, or the foetus in her womb (63, 72, 77), and of her “belly” (67, 72). The reader becomes aware that her alertness to her body is a sign of her sense of depersonalisation when she sees herself in terms of the metaphor of the bone that a fellow traveller raises after she had just picked it over and had said to her colleagues: “who’d have what another man has pushed to the side of his plate... This bone... picked bare and only wanted by a dog” (71). Frieda’s interpretation is also borne out in her apparent impression that her relationship with Michael makes her a victim of racial abuse, because she indirectly concurs with the women that she is listening to on the bus that a romantic affair across race (during apartheid) is a “disgrace,” that is, abusive to black women who, according to her travelling companion, “should know better not to go with white men” (66).

Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue, Nigel C. Gibson, ed., (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), pp.283-293.

²⁴ Johanna Forster, “An Invitation to Dialogue: Clarifying the Position of Feminist Gender Theory in Relation to Sexual Difference Theory,” in *Gender & Society*, (Vol.13, No.4, August 1999), p.436.

After having an abortion, she confesses guilt in the terms that allude to Simon Peter's expression of remorse for denying Jesus Christ. Peter's expiation for his denunciation bonded him with the church forever. The circumstances that contribute to the build up of her admission to her culpability involve her in the quandary of identity that apartheid created. When asked if she is "coloured" by the abortionist who operates her clinic along racist lines, she declines: "I say 'No', and wait for all the cockerels in Cape Town to crow simultaneously" (78). Frieda is vexed with herself when she answers in the negative to the apartheid designation of 'coloured', because she knows that denial in this case is tantamount to betraying also the child that she seeks to abort. Her refusal of the labeling "coloured" and, by implication, her fortuitous disloyalty to her foetus, is a rite. This ritual frees her to perceive her body, especially what it is capable of conceiving in a sexual relation with a man across race and of herself terminating her pregnancy (that may result from such a relationship), without reifying a black woman experience and identity via binaries.

Therefore, Frieda's imagining of herself being remorseful for having an abortion suggests that she is claiming radical innocence in the sense in which, for the poet William Blake, it cannot be a moral absolute. For instance, her presentation of the fact of her termination of her pregnancy in terms of being "[d]eflowered by yellow hands wielding a catheter" (80) implies that she admits complicity in her fall from innocence. The concept of a slowly rotting flower is enunciated in the colour yellow, and echoes a Blakean notion of experience. According to William Blake, the flower innocently opens its petals in search of the glory that the sun provides. In the process, Blake also implicitly argues, the

flower's petals gain bright colours that attract "The invisible worm/ That flies in the night" and that later lays its egg inside. He also argues that the worm later hatches from the egg and feeds on the flower's petals. It thus turns yellow in the slow process of being consumed by the insect inside.²⁵ While the flower stands for the divinity that sustains the worm in its metamorphosis into a fly, Frieda's body whose skin she defines as being "pumpkin-yellow" (33) thus alluding to the flower's petals, is a tool that she uses to save her child from the terror that she knows, and not to capture the purity of blood. Her attempt leads to a fall from innocence. Thus she expresses her refusal of the "coloured" designation and, by implication, of having terminated her pregnancy in terms of Peter's denial of Christ. As bell hooks argues in her analysis of Sethe, the heroine of Tony Morrison's *Beloved* who murders her daughter so that she does not face slavery when she grows up, "[i]t is the telling of" "history [in these terms in which the narrator accepts complicity in her fall from grace] that makes possible political self-recovery."²⁶

In another story, 'When the Train Comes', Frieda projects herself explicitly in a way that suggests that she rescues her body from the patronising texts of social morality. In contrast to the title story, she thinks about sexual intercourse irrespective of the fact that she has barely reached puberty. In much of 'When the Train Comes', she imagines without any inhibition the inevitability of meeting and interacting with boys (and by implication with white men), because she is about to leave Namaqualand by train for her secondary school education in a multi-racial institution in Cape Town (24, 34). A good

²⁵ William Blake, *The Sick Rose*.

²⁶ bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Cultural Studies*, eds., Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, eds., (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), p.345.

deal of the action takes place at the station that apparently introduces her through its “white section” (25) or “platform” (27) to a complicated world of racial segregation and of male chauvinism. While waiting to board the train, she is conscious of her uneasiness with her father paying “unnecessary” attention to her. She “smart[s] at his attempts to shield [her] from the boys... [because she feels that his efforts] are quite unnecessary” (22). She also recalls that her father preferred her hair “pulled back tightly to stem any remaining tendency to curl” (26), and that he regarded Jos, Frieda’s childhood friend who in Frieda’s father’s opinion “knew everything that grown-ups thought should be kept from us,” as a “cheeky child, too big for her boots” who would “land in a madam’s kitchen” (29). Frieda’s displeasure with her father manifests itself in her sense of discomfort that she at first describes as “a lump in [her] throat that [she] cannot account for” (22, 23), and that she sometimes locates in her “stomach” (33, 34) perhaps because, in her opinion, she is “hung[ry]” (35) to break free from being belittled for being a woman. Her “stomach” in this case is reminiscent of her belly that she implicitly presents in the title story as the site of black womanhood that apartheid criminalises and threatens. This sense of being constrained recurs in her agitation on being watched by boys (27) and in their “wolf whistle” (24) because, as with her father and male colonial racists, it asserts a gendered social symbolic order.

Her concentration in her recollection of herself as an innocent girl who is ignorant about sex transcends the confinement to which she feels reduced. Hence she is able to reminisce about “a little boy boring a big toe into the sand”. (23) As it were, she indulges sexually and innocently as a child without bodily committing sin, because she had “never

played with boys... [because] [t]here were none to play with when [her family] lived on a farm". Thus her return to her childhood portrait about sex in the image of one of her mates who pees into a "mud-constructed 'teapot'" (23) weakens the gravity that social custom morally ascribes to sexual intercourse. This hindsight also secures her health in a world that the sexually transmitted diseases have globalised through the exchange of body fluid such as semen. As opposed to Hendrikse's "terrifying thing" that she "catches a glimpse" of just before she sleeps with him on her return from exile (123), she sees "the boy as he deftly pulls a curious hose from the leg of his khaki shorts and, with one eye shut, aims an arc of yellow pee into the teapot" (23). In addition to the fact that she anxiously confesses that she is "the kind of girl whom boys [don't] look at" (21), and that she "sometimes cr[ies] about being fat" (23), it is evident that she has never been sexually intimate, and therefore that her sense of emptiness is a metaphor of what she sees as her hunger to interact with the world without being inhibited by any hegemony, as well as her own inexperience. (Having matured, she undergoes a challenging process justifying to herself against apartheid that there is nothing essentially wrong/sinful in a black woman developing sexual desires for a man whom apartheid classifies as white.)

Towards the end of 'When The Train Comes', and while still obsessed with her impending studies at a school that had been recently opened to all races, she returns to her childhood imagination about romance. However, as similarly evident in the metaphor of the flower that she uses to conjure up innocence for herself in the title story, her portrait of herself as a pre-adolescent sexually indulging with a boy despite her complete ignorance of sex trivialises the alleged moral rectitude cited by those who legislate

against free association. In other words, she shatters any notion of sexuality/gender as well as race by describing them in terms of “the range of expression, the multiplicity, or the instability of meanings and subjectivity”.²⁷ Hence it is important that she recalls her thoughts at that time while waiting for the train to take her to the new school:

Sarie said that I might meet white boys and for the moment, fortified by conjugations of Amo, I saw the eyes of Anglican boys, remote princes leaning from their carriages, penetrate the pumpkin-yellow of my flesh. (33)

The evocation of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, in “Sarie” above is anachronistic. In terms of colonial discourse, she is an epitome of “steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, [a] physical characteristic of the Hottentot female which captured the eye of early European travellers”.²⁸ In Frieda’s story, however, Baartman is a voice through which Frieda critiques the sense of disgrace that is associated with male colonial fixation with black women bodies. In other words, Baartman makes Frieda think of her “flesh” (skin?) in the terms that suggest that she is a (sexually) attractive and willing party in the black-white encounter. She therefore articulates a sense of radical innocence and implicitly wishes to share it with those white colonials who hypocritically were having sex with black women while publicly claiming to be deferential to the Colour Bar and the Immorality Act. In addition, she creates an alternative platform to come to terms with the gendered violence of colonisation.

²⁷ Johanna Forster, *An Invitation to Dialogue: Clarifying the Position of Feminist Gender Theory in Relation to Sexual Difference Theory*, in *Gender and Society*, Vol.13, No.4, August 1999), p.447.

²⁸ See Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Race, Writing, And Difference*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.232.

In contrast to ‘You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town’ and ‘When the Train Comes’, Frieda presents in ‘Behind the Bougainvillea’, ‘A Fair Exchange’ and ‘A Trip to the Gifberge’ her extended family, elaborating on her critique of the dramas of mediation that she uses to narrate her biography. It is also in these stories that Frieda explicitly defines identity beyond the “information” that pertains to mere “suffer[ing]” or that “has only biological validity,” as opposed to one that is “subject to ideological scrutiny”.²⁹ ‘Behind the Bougainvillea’, ‘A Fair Exchange’ and ‘A Trip to the Gifberge’ therefore differ structurally from ‘You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town’, the story in which the memorialising of blackness is internal to Frieda, and dialogues, key interactions and conflicts of which form a coherent fabric only in their relation to her quest for radical innocence. It is argued below that her attempt to present herself as a dialogised subject in the other stories is shown by her extended family to be too contrived and self-justifying.

‘Behind the Bougainvillea’ focuses on Frieda’s return to South Africa from England after eleven years (121), and specifically on an incident that occurs when she goes to consult Dr Van Zyl about her chest pains. She is aware that she is cynical especially when compared to her family who acknowledges that it owes its good health to Van Zyl whom her father describes as a “clever chap” who “got [her] through rheumatic fever when [she was] only five or six” (107). Her memory of at least one of Van Zyl’s visits is vivid because she recollects that he had cured her of “bronchitis” (108) many years ago. She

²⁹ Njabulo Ndebele, *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, (Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), p.18.

also recalls that he seems to have healed her late mother's "asthma," who had called him a "decent chap" after he had ordered that she jump the queue, because she was an "old girl" (109).

It seems as if Frieda is reluctant to consult Van Zyl, because she sees him a symbol of the apartheid terror that she dealt with in the title story (the one who, despite impregnating a black woman, votes actively or passively for the political system that tortures blacks), and hence she sees him as "an uncouth old white man" (109). (In other words, she will not have him touch her, however innocently.) When she finally goes to Van Zyl's rooms having been persuaded to do so by her father, and while waiting for her turn, she meets a man from her past wearing "round mirror glass[es]," and in them she sees her "face bleached by an English autumn" (111). It seems that this mirror image of her cold beaten visage is a sign of her (seeming) aversion to her family's warm and judicious embracing of such resources as the Western medicine such as Van Zyl dispenses, because they have already conquered the horror that colonial modernity evokes in black people.³⁰ Indeed, her people do not read anything exclusively colonial in the therapy that Van Zyl provides despite being fully aware of the power that he has to exterminate black people in accordance with apartheid. ('In Home Sweet Home', her uncle meets her at home while on one of her rare visits from exile and accuses her of being uprooted and therefore of being as stubborn as a mule. (95)) It also appears that Wicomb presents Frieda's grounds for her refusal to consult Dr van Zyl as being (unnecessarily) racial, unimaginative and

³⁰ According to Matlou, black mine migrants whose site of labour is the underground tunnels are first intravenously fed with substances in order to 'kill' fear. He continues that the depersonalised persons develop a poor self-concept that manifests itself in the tendency not to bathe. (See Chapter One of this study).

not nuanced (an accusation that seems to recur also in 'A Trip to the Gifberge'). Perhaps indicative of a need to reassess this attitude, Wicomb portrays Frieda seeing the likeness of a passage from a book that she had been reading in the "mirror" glasses of her old acquaintance while waiting for her turn to consult: "The right side was browner than a European's would be, yet not so distinctly brown as to type him as a Hindu or Pakistani and certainly he was no Negro, for his features were quite Caucasian as Edward's own" (111).

Later, she realises that the man in whose spectacles she sees images of herself is "Henry Hendrikse" (115), a childhood acquaintance who once wrote to her professing his love, and that he is a Xhosa (119) freedom fighter who owns a "revolver" (121), and he soon after leads her out of the surgery to have water out of a tap, because she is feeling faint (117). Thereafter, they walk towards his friend's house to let her "sit down... and rest" (120) because her dizziness will not abate. When she "come[s] to" (121), she then makes love with him. Immediately afterwards, she goes to the "lavatory" and "[o]n the seat... inhale[s] deeply and contract[s her] stomach muscles to expel the stubborn semen" (123). Her making love to Hendrikse emanates not from her "desire," but from what she feels to be a need to assuage her guilt because, in her view, she had deserted her country for just over a decade (121). She unwittingly conflates the notions of national identity and of the woman's body. The tragedy in this (con)fusion is that, once more, she falls from grace by according her body ontological stability or essence. When the story concludes, she learns (with mortification) from her father that Hendrikse was rumoured to have been a "spy" (124).

Her determination not to conceive and, by implication, not to establish a substantially meaningful relationship with Hendrikse for wrong reasons in ‘Behind the Bougainvillea’ is also implicit in her portrayal of romance as a ‘question of power’. (By contrast with the boy who, in her memory of herself as a child, takes out his penis and urinates (his “yellow pee”) into her mud-constructed “teapot” in the story ‘When the Train Comes’, (23) Hendrikse is a representation of the gendered hegemony to which Frieda submits.) Seen exclusively in this (flawed) portrait of the male symbolic order, sex is reminiscent of the agenda of the petty bourgeoisie in Bessie Head’s image of post-colonial Botswana. Hendrikse, in Wicomb’s story, is a symbol of this dispensation that Frieda describes as covertly misogynistic³¹ and “terrifying” (123). Hendrikse is reminiscent of Michael in the title story, because Frieda speaks of him implicitly as depicting her in the terms that oversimplify or trivialise her as black and female when he attempts to dissuade her from terminating her pregnancy. The adult Frieda of ‘Behind the Bougainvillea’ therefore expels semen after sleeping with Hendrikse when she uses her body muscles take authority over the possibility of whether she conceives. This act of self-actualisation is ritual in orientation, because she also symbolically cleanses herself on realising that sex with a man who is experiencing a similar racial negation as herself does not resolve her predicament as woman-othered.

Frieda’s critique of the monologue that is apparent in her imagining herself actively reclaiming her body in dialectical terms is further elaborated in the concluding story, ‘A

³¹ See, for example, Bessie Head’s fictional portrayal of identity politics in post-colonial Botswana in *A Question of Power*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1974).

Trip to the Gifberge'. Similar to the title story where Frieda's 'travels' via her imagination/story to the 'facts of black womanhood' constitute a "ritual enactment", 'A Trip to the Gifberge' is structured on a motif of the journey. On her return from exile, she and her mother set off for the Gifberge, a site that bears the mark of the Khoikhoi occupation allegedly prior to the coloniser's arrival. This trip is reminiscent of a ritual of re-induction into a home in spiritual/metaphysical terms.³² By implication, Frieda and her mother develop a sense of racial self-awareness without being hindered by the discourse of European colonisation that attempts to violate whatever ethical relationship a black person attempts to create with themselves, their bodies, and with the land. It is also in this concluding story that she presents her mother, that is, a fictional creation in Frieda's stories, as being alive and commenting on her from a different ontological arena. In other words, the mother figure functions as a critique of the narrator of this collection as well as the creator of all the people in these stories. In this story, the mother expresses disapproval of her daughter's decision to drop one of her fictional creations, that is, by presenting her mother as deceased (172). (This criticism is substantiated at least in 'Home Sweet Home' when, according to Frieda, her uncle, Dawie, shows her "the white stones of [her] mother[']s grave] on the koppie" (95).) Frieda's assertion of a self is, therefore, examined intertextually.³³

³² For a detailed discussion of this theme, refer also to the discussion of Mandla Langa's stories in Chapter Four of this research.

³³ According to Kwame A. Appiah, the discourses of the race and nation are sometimes problematised by the fact that they are argued for on the allegation that there is a spirit or "Zeitgeist" or a collective unconscious that links people across time by virtue of the history of racial oppression. See Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.47-72.

Frieda's mother in this story is averse to essentialising. To her mother's stated intention to "take up a little white protea bush for [her] garden", for instance, Frieda cynically retorts, "And then you can hoist the South African flag and sing 'Die Stem' [apartheid national anthem]". She is (unwittingly) alert to the fact that the social/political claims to space, identity and legitimacy are mainly relative, and indirectly, that the truth-value of such claims depends merely on people's ignorance of/refusal to acknowledge other competing histories. Hence she responds to her daughter's bookish but disingenuous contention that the protea is an incontrovertible and sole sign of Afrikaner nationalism by saying "[w]e know who lived in these mountains when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country" (181).

However, Frieda's mother refuses to reduce histories and truth to each other, and implicitly reasons that her daughter's equating of the protea plant with Afrikaner domination is reductionist. In other words, her mother argues for a self-reflexive national identity, and this is also evident when she interrogates Frieda's reasons for imagining having an abortion. Indirectly, she encourages her daughter to admit to a sense of guilt, and admonishes her to further question her deployment of Christian mythology to justify/account for having envisioned terminating her pregnancy (171). Based on reason, her mother argues for identity as "[b]eing in itself... when an entity exists objectively undifferentiated".³⁴ In other words, she denies Afrikaner nationalism's immunity to interrogation. Because she is committed to dialogue, however, she also expresses a need to assert (with qualifications) that the inscriptions of black occupation of Africa prior to

³⁴ Hegel in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship," *Research in African Literatures*, (Vol.31, No.1, Spring, 2000), p.3.

the colonial period guarantee the ascendancy of blackness over Afrikaner history that attempts to make a case for white superiority (181). Seen strictly from this point of view, both forms of nationalism cancel each other. Hence she insists on relocating the protea into her yard, and retorts to her daughter:

You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see on it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it (181).

She is, therefore, a voice in her daughter's consciousness through which Frieda is able to analyse her role as an imaginative writer, and draws her attention to the significance of consciously contracting a relationship with Africa and, by implication, with her body without presenting it in "spectacular" terms.

The deconstruction of national identity and of the self that the dialogue between Frieda and her mother in 'A Trip to the Gifberge' brings to the surface is reiterated in the main character of 'Jan Klinkies'. In this story, Frieda muses over one of her father's cousins, Jan Klinkies (11), who was once married to Aunt Frieda. When the story commences, Frieda and her father are visiting Klinkies during one of those biannual visits that the family makes to his house (12). As opposed to Frieda who establishes self-awareness in order to assert difference from the dominant discourses that she presents as racially essentialist, the character Klinkies does not seem to see his body in terms of the history of oppression that defines his body as negation. Nor does he consider the memory of his past as important, because, as Frieda notes, "[a]n event some two years before had sealed off the past and all that concerned [him] now was in the present" (11). This seemingly

also prevents him from “correlate[ing] the viscosity of blood with the frequency of [his relatives who visited him]” (12). He is not concerned about how he looks; his “trousers... are far too wide, sag[ged] at the waist in spite of the improvised wire belt,” (15) and his “lower lip... sometimes drooped until a trickle of saliva brought him back, sometimes at as special and lively an occasion as a Christmas gathering” (14).

However, while Klinkies’s wife, Truida, is resigned to “the business of the loss of the land... [as a result of the Group Areas Act and] sees [forced removal to the Cape Flats] as the blessing in disguise which is God’s favourite method” (13), Klinkies mortally detests “Rooibos tea”, because “its [pack’s] illustration of an ox wagon scaling Drakensberg” reminds him of apartheid’s humiliation of black people. This perception also results in his calling coffee “Boerpoison” (17). Probably, he associates coffee and “Rooibos tea” with the pastime of the colonial to whom Skitterboud possibly often sees in an exploitative master-servant relationship a group of black labourers. Throughout this story, Klinkies, as host, does not adopt the patronising attitude that his visitors heap on him. Instead, he merely stares, rushes, flings “his face skywards and recite[s] what could only be the SABC report of the wind that day” when he is spoken to (12). In addition, he has a fondness for stripping paper covering off condensed milk cans, and then pasting these tins onto a tree stem so that, according to Frieda, “the branches stooping heavily under the hundreds of cans tied to them with wire rattled and sent off beams of blinding light at angles doubtlessly corresponding to a well-known law” (20). His opposition to apartheid is subtly interrogated in the same way that Frieda’s mother questions her daughter’s unwitting use of binaries in her assertion that the protea belongs to Afrikaner nationalism.

Similar to Frieda's mother, words and concepts are for Klinkies the means towards understanding and dealing with reality, as opposed to being substitutes for the truth. Frieda uses this episode in which Klinkies hopelessly fails to impose order to elaborate on the critique of the claims that she makes for radical innocence in her portrait of herself mediating the black experience, that is, in the title story as well as in 'When the Train Comes' and in 'Behind the Bougainvillea'.

'A Fair Exchange' is another story that Frieda uses to consolidate a "historical and secular" "irreducible subjective core"³⁵ that rejects the propositions that build defence instead of promoting knowledge. This is a story that explicitly makes possible an evaluation of a black feminist project of self-reclamation in which Frieda is engaged in the title story and in 'When the Train comes'. By implication, her foregrounding of a black man's mediation of his experience of the emasculating conditions of apartheid is consistent with the 'worldly' (as opposed to parochial) feminism that informs her attempt at healing herself from colonial depersonalisation. As noted in the examination of the invocation of the masculinity tropes in Maseko's stories in Chapter Two, "[a]ny politics that has a transformative power has to envisage, if in a negative way, the freedom and self-autonomy that would make such politics unnecessary."³⁶ This is why, in 'A Fair Exchange', Frieda presents herself as a self-aware storyteller who attempts to document a biography of the key character, Skitterboud. It is fitting that she is interested in him,

³⁵ Edward Said, "Intellectuals in the Postcolonial World," *Salmagundi*, (Vol.70-71, Spring/Summer, 1986), p.55.

³⁶ Seamus Deane, Introduction, *Nationalism, Colonialism, And Literature*, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward W. Said, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p.4.

because he is conscious of being a migrant who regularly crafts different histories of himself consistent with the kind of relationships that he establishes while managing to live in spite of apartheid, and with less agony. (The Frieda of the title story, by contrast, is anguished about her construction of herself within the racist and sexist patronising that the history of South Africa is pervaded by.) She is inquisitive about Skitterboud because of his popularity as a brilliant player of a home-made guitar (136-137), his dancing skills (127), and because she wants to know what transpired that day when he found his wife, Meid, and their children gone (139) after he had been away the whole day to “round up the sheep for a count” (138). It seems that Meid became annoyed when Skitterboud did not return home early after he had promised to bring her “*kambroo*,” “to steady her stomach”, because “she was with child” (127), and in consequence she took their children and left him. Frieda seems fascinated by the fact that he subsequently approached the court to file for malicious desertion, and to seek custody of his children whom he speaks about with great fondness:

You miss the laughing and the crying and the fighting of the children. You don't always notice them when they're there but when they're gone the silence lurks in the corners like a sulking *tokolos* [a creature that according to the myths of many Southern African black communities occupies the abode between the human and the spiritual and is considered a menace to the mortals] (141).

It appears that Skitterboud's desire to keep his family intact recalls for Frieda the depiction that she makes of herself in the title story, that is, reclaiming her body. As evident also in the discussion of ‘When the Train Comes’, she gives the impression that she takes it for granted that the story that she tells of herself grants her an uncontested authority over her body. By implication, she is under the impression that her story confers

her authority over the identity that she visualises of herself, that is, as long as she confesses her *mea culpa*. The argument is therefore that her focus on Skitterboud helps her problematise her reclamation of black womanhood, possibly in the same way as her mother's voice does in 'A Trip to the Gifberge'.

For instance, the narrative that Skitterboud constructs of himself foregrounds for Frieda at least two interrelated key issues that constitute significant dilemmas or predicaments for a black depersonalised with regard to the conception of the self that s/he can have about him/herself. The first is migrancy, and the second has to do with how to claim rectitude in the terms that a dominant order has already monopolised. (Frieda's exilic status; first, consequent upon her going to study in Cape Town away from her father and following her departure for England for her University education and, second, as a person who colonial discourse defines through biological and racial essentialisms, is a challenge that undermines her attempt to reclaim Africa or the land or her body in non-dialogised terms. This is why, in another story, 'A Trip to the Gifberge', she relies on the voice of her mother to deconstruct the assertions for radical innocence and identity that she makes in 'You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town'.)

Understood as a contract that is sustained by, among other things, building and sharing a home as well as raising children, for instance, marriage is for the migrant Skitterboud cumbersome when the time he utilises earning his keep far outweighs the amount of the time that he spends at home bonding with his partner and family. Also for such a worker, marriage is difficult to sustain when its legitimacy is decided along Calvinist and

condescending racist principles that are not worker-friendly. In addition to being paid a pittance and “weekly [with a] bottle of wine,” for instance, Skitterboud was coerced by his employer’s wife, into getting married to Meid, because Ounooi felt that Meid would “be willing to learn” and thus deserving of God, “even if,” Ounooi continued, “Bushmen will not think of God” (132).

It therefore looks as if Frieda reasons that whatever narrative she can tell of herself is blemished by her knowledge that apartheid has already ‘overdetermined’ her as a black woman. In other words, she gives the impression that she demonstrates an awareness of the fact that she faces a similar struggle as Skitterboud because of the authority that the colonial setting denies her over her body. This is why she is impressed with Skitterboud who mediates the demanding chores expected of him by his employer by being remorseful about the fact that he is a disappointment to his family. In other words, she admires his implied contempt for recklessly deploying the data of the racially harrowing experiences as a framework of how to define himself. This is evident in Skitterboud’s use of humour to narrate his biography in a way that pays homage to the ebb and flow of his life with his family across the wilderness and by admitting responsibility for some of his downfalls (136). Rather than being bitter about his white master who demands unwavering care for his flock of sheep in return for meager “wages and the weekly bottle of wine” (132), Skitterboud is ecstatic about “the fat-tailed Afrikaner” and the merino, “wayward as a young woman” (138). His employer’s sheep ironically register in Skitterboud in personified terms, because he had earlier that morning had to placate his infants’ fussing over which plate to have breakfast (129). He implicitly associates his

children's meaningless unease with the sheep's unnecessary commotion at shearing when they would be "disobedient" and eager "to scale the walls like monkeys, even though they like nothing better than losing those heavy expensive coats" (138). Indirectly, he sees his child's quarrelsome tendency to be picky about crockery as a mere triviality that has no capacity to detract from the significance of feeding. This is why he speaks about his master's livestock in almost similar terms to those he uses for his child. Frieda utilises Skitterboud's narration of his biography to cast insight into the different ethical battles that black Africans participate in, and from which they enunciate difference in their own terms beyond the colonial space. Skitterboud thus recalls Matlou who sees beyond his father's employer's pair of spectacles an inability to recognise his own depravity in his employee's desperation.³⁷ Skitterboud's nephew, Giel, fails to build this type of relationship that transcends the coloniser/colonised gaze, and so he one day gives in to hunger and steals Karel's sheep (135). Giel is not mature enough to negotiate the adversities of racial depersonalisation without suffering angst. According to Frieda, Giel "look[s] into the distance and his eyes scale[d] the hills and seem[ed] to land in the town from where his words c[o]me oven fresh" when he speaks about his prison experience (135).

The type of maturity that Frieda foregrounds in her narration of Skitterboud reveals that he is disrespectful of the Western concepts of marriage and divorce, despite being affirmed by the presiding magistrate who upholds Skitterboud's charge that Meid had maliciously deserted him. According to the magistrate, Skitterboud's relationship with

³⁷ Refer to Chapter One of this thesis.

Meid and their children is fully written in civil law, that is, in the sense that she “has no right to take away with her anything from his house. Everything, from the children to the last scrap of underclothing she is wearing, belongs to him and is his right to retrieve” (142). Skitterboud is disapproving of the fact that the so-called civil way of resolving a seeming malicious desertion is based on the erroneous assumption that reduces one party to another’s inalienable object. Indirectly, he does not expect an institution that claims to uphold civil rights to be critical of the migrant condition that is bent against any notion of respect for individual rights. His deployment of humour to satirise an icon of the institution that equates corporal features with wisdom helps him to undermine colonial discourse from within. This insurgent mode is also obvious when he thinks aloud; the Magistrate’s “nose [as he was handing down judgment] had disappeared... [to the point where] he ended up with quite a small nose for a white man” (142).

Frieda’s interest in Skitterboud is, therefore, consistent with her attempt to reclaim blackness via a secular mode. This is because his narration of his biography is implicitly to her a self-interrogated discourse of power that is comparable to her own, that is, as given shape by her reliance on the critical thrust of the voice of her mother (in ‘A Trip to the Gifberge’), and by Frieda’s dependence on the use of textures of everyday life in the hands of, say, Jan Klinkies (in ‘Jan Klinkies’) and other black women who use skin lighteners. His adoption of different perspectives in order to enunciate a discursive identity thus makes Frieda remark that Skitterboud’s story is

yellow with age. It curls without question at the edges.
 Many years have passed since the events settled into a
 picture which then was torn in sadness and rage so that now
 reassembled the cracks remain all too clear. They soften a

facial line here and pinch into meanness a gesture elsewhere. A few fragments are irretrievably lost. (136)

An attempt has been made to argue that self-reclamation in Wicomb's stories relies on narration, and that it reveals a series of 'journeys' that open sites of resistance, central to which blackness is authenticated in terms of what bell hooks refers to as 'ritual enactment'. In these rituals, Frieda's voice creates a platform on which black people enunciate new spaces that define a self in secular and dialogised terms. It was also submitted that she uses this '*carnivalesque*' as a framework to narrate her '*Bildungsroman*'.